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LEATHER DISTRICT - URBAN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

The Leather District is a well preserved historic district, and because of this, much of the development opportunities will be within the realm of adaptive reuse or rooftop additions. Located just south of the Financial District, the district is undergoing major change. While historically the Leather District was primarily used for manufacturing and warehousing, by 1986 many of the buildings were converted to offices to service the market created by the large office towers in the vicinity.

The landuse breakdown in the Leather District for 1986, while the total square footage for the district was about 3 million square feet, was 76% office, 16% industrial, 6% retail, and 2% residential uses. Future projections show a 16% increase in square footage for the area, with increases primarily in office and retail space, a decline in industrial space, and no change in the amount of residential use in the district.

Urban Design Objectives

One of the primary urban design objectives is to retain and enhance the historic architectural character of the Leather District. The following are ways of achieving this:

- o Retain, through restoration and rehabilitation, the historic warehouse buildings, and other buildings within the district which contribute to its character.
- o Maintain a consistent streetscape language throughout the Leather District to emphasize its unique quality as a well preserved, cohesive historical district.
- o Ensure that any new development or rooftop additions in the area contribute to the existing historic character of the district and limit growth so that it is consistent with existing buildings.

The other key urban design objective is to reconnect the Leather District with its surrounding area. The following are ways of achieving this:

- o Create a more continuous pedestrian environment between the Leather District and its neighbors, which include:
 - Chinatown, across the Surface Artery;
 - The Financial District, across Dewey Square;
 - The South Station Redevelopment, across Atlantic Avenue; and
 - The Gateway Parcel Development, across Kneeland Street.

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- o Reinforce views into the surrounding districts with new development or open space on the edge of or adjacent to the Leather District. Important views are:
 - The Financial District, looking across Dewey Square;
 - The Chinatown Gateway, looking down Beach Street;
 - The South Station Redevelopment Project, looking down Essex, East, Beach and Kneeland Streets; and
 - The Gateway Parcel Redevelopment, looking down Lincoln and South Streets.
- o Alleviate the sense of isolation from the rest of the area that the Leather District currently suffers from through redevelopment adjacent to the district. Specific areas of concern are:
 - The Gateway Parcel Redevelopment on opposite side of Kneeland Street;
 - New development of Chinatown Edge across the Surface Artery;
 - The South Station Redevelopment across Atlantic Avenue; and
 - Dewey Square.

With the intention of retaining and enhancing the historic architectural character of the Leather District, it is important to reinforce and encourage the renovation and reuse of the existing buildings within the district. A vital element within this district is the wide variety of land-uses. This mix of offices, retail establishments, commercial art galleries, and residential uses should continue while allowing for the continued presence of light industry such as printing, graphics and leather businesses that have historically been located in this area.

New Development Guidelines

The following are the development guidelines for the Leather District:

- o A strong street wall should be maintained, with no set backs below the established street wall height. Block parcels should be clearly delineated, and materials should contribute to the sense of a strong street wall and be sensitive to the existing architecture in the district.
- o The base of the building should be emphasized, and the second level also delineated. The entrance should be recessed and store front windows used on the ground level as much as possible.
- o The top of the building should be emphasized by heavy

cornice lines and/or a change in material and windows at the upper most levels. A variation of cornice heights from one building to the next is common and therefore encouraged.

- o The fenestration, detailing and trim should express the richness and texture of the existing architecture. Horizontal trim lines on the facade are very important on the existing buildings and should be taken into consideration in any new development.

The degree of historic reference to the existing architecture of the area would depend on the amount of the street frontage that the new development covers. A development parcel and/or the rehabilitation of an existing building up to 80' in height which covers a maximum of one-fifth of the street frontage for a block could utilize a more contemporary expression. In this case, the project would be subject to BRA Design Review under Article 31. However, corner or major infill sites, those over one-fifth of the block frontage, should respond to the prevailing historic bay scale and proportional systems of the district.

Rooftop Addition Guidelines

Additions above 80' in height should be setback from public view to preserve the existing cornice lines and massing, but could be of a new material, since they are not seen from a public way. However, alterations or construction on top of historic buildings (most Category I and II buildings) will not be permitted, especially on those that reinforce a row with a consistent roofline or roof type on a street/block.

With all rooftop additions, direct and oblique views should be taken into consideration, especially when it is a vertical extension of the facade. How the building facade meets the sky as seen from the street, neighboring buildings, and open space should be examined. When creating a vertical extension to an existing facade, up to the 80' height limit, it is important to consider the:

- o Composition of the base, middle, and top of a building; the new addition should not strip existing parapet and cornice detailing, but instead incorporate this into the new design.
- o Existing visual rhythms and proportional systems which should be incorporated into the addition.
- o Appropriate solid/void ratios which should be used to complement the existing building.

In the case of a vertical extension to the facade, the height of the addition should depend on the average height of the cornice

lines within the block and the proportions of the existing building. The average height of the block should be determined either by all the existing buildings in the block, or by those existing buildings that will remain after new development. This would be determined in the BRA Design Review Process.

Open Space/Public Space

Open space initiatives are unnecessary, and even inappropriate for the dense urban historical fabric of the Leather District. Yet because of the small size of the district, open space initiatives on its edges can be very effective. A main focus for the Open Space Plan in the Leather District is the open space opportunities adjacent to the district. The following open space opportunities directly effect the Leather District:

- Dewey Square/ Central Artery,
- Chinatown/ Surface Artery,
- Highway Spaghetti, Proposed open space, and
- South Station/ Atlantic Avenue.

The design of the district's adjacent open spaces should accommodate the diverse user population of the area, which ranges from Chinatown residents to Downtown office workers. Open space should be created and enhanced to facilitate access to and from the Leather District. Physical and visual barriers should be eliminated to ensure that new open space adjacent to the Leather District reconnects the district with the existing downtown network of open spaces. Any streetscape improvements such as signage, lighting, sidewalk paving and street furniture should accentuate views to adjacent districts and encourage pedestrian travel.

Transportation and Access

Arterial streets bound the Leather District, but do not run through this relatively small area. These streets are Essex Street, the Surface Artery, Kneeland Street, and Atlantic Avenue. One reason why the Leather District seems isolated from adjacent districts is because of these major roadways which create barriers at its borders.

The street pattern in the Leather District is a one-way system. This was developed in an attempt to eliminate through traffic and ease congestion from on-street loading procedures. Although heavy through traffic is kept to the outside of the district, congestion of local streets is still present due to the on-street loading procedures at warehouse buildings on Atlantic and South Streets. Trucks are not only double parking for loading purposes, but also parking perpendicular to the buildings, leaving traffic seriously obstructed as a consequence.

New infrastructure improvements anticipated for the future will have a significant effect on the Leather District. The redesign and depression of the Central Artery, and subsequently the redesign of the Surface Artery, will have a positive impact on the district. The Third Harbor Tunnel Project, and the relocation of ramps in relation to the Massachusetts Turnpike and the Central Artery, will have a large influence on the district because of its close proximity.

Parking is very limited within the Leather District, and like most districts, the parking demand is greater than the supply. There are two parking facilities located within the district: the Lincoln Street Garage which accommodates 350 cars, and a lot used for surface parking which accommodates 68 cars. There is also on-street parking available within the district, some of which is restricted to Leather District Permits only. Short term on-street parking is essential for retail and commercial uses in the district, while off-street parking could be used for long term uses.

Public transportation serves the Leather District by way of the MBTA's Red Line at South Station. Also South Station provides commuter rail service to southern and western suburbs, and a terminus point for express and local bus routes.

Policy goals

- o mitigate adverse impacts of future infrastructure improvements and new development on the Leather District;
- o formulate a carefully balanced landuse plan to mitigate traffic problems in the district that are magnified by on-street loading procedures; and

- o study existing parking conditions and project future parking needs.

